

The AMS Must Justify Its Support of the NSA

Roger Schlafly (letters, *Notices*, November 2014) accuses mathematicians of an “overwrought” and “over-excited” response to the recently-revealed activities of the National Security Agency (NSA). So, let us look at some cold facts. In 2011, the NSA explicitly stated its goal of universal surveillance, describing its “posture” as “collect it all”, “know it all”, “exploit it all”. The same year, the NSA’s close British partner GCHQ said it was intercepting over fifty billion communication events per day. In 2012, a single NSA program celebrated its *trillionth* metadata record.

On encryption: the NSA’s 2013 budget request sought funds to “Insert vulnerabilities into commercial encryption systems”. The NSA described its secret program Sentry Raven as “work[ing] with specific US commercial entities...to modify US manufactured encryptions systems to make them exploitable for SIGINT [signals intelligence]”. The aim is clear: that no two human beings shall be able to communicate digitally without the NSA being able to listen.

Schlafly is, at least, correct in noting that outrage at the intelligence agencies’ abuse of surveillance powers is nothing new: from the FBI’s bugging of Martin Luther King and subsequent attempt to blackmail him into suicide, to the 2011 extrajudicial killing of an American child by CIA drone strike (a program to which the NSA supplies surveillance data). He is justified in worrying about the data held by Google, Facebook, etc., but he writes as if concern over that and state surveillance were mutually exclusive, which of course they are not; and much of that data is harvested by the NSA’s PRISM program anyway.

Further, his comparison with 1970s technology distracts from the awesome invasive power of today’s Internet. As the NSA’s former general counsel Stewart Baker said, “metadata absolutely tells you everything about somebody’s life”. Former NSA director Michael Hayden agreed,

adding “we kill people based on meta-data”.

By collaborating with the NSA, the AMS sends a strong political message: that it is proud to support the NSA’s work and welcomes it into the mathematical community. It is just as surely a political position as withdrawing cooperation would be. Many members are vigorously opposed to much of what the NSA does; indeed, when the *Notices* set out to organize the series “Mathematicians discuss the Snowden revelations”, its editors could not find *anyone* to write in the NSA’s defense. (And when they finally did, it was a longtime NSA employee.)

How does the AMS leadership justify its continued cooperation with the NSA? Is it certain it has the backing of the membership? And what exactly *would* the NSA have to do in order for the AMS to declare “Enough: this partnership brings mathematicians into disrepute”?

(A fully referenced version of this letter is available at www.maths.ed.ac.uk/~t1/a/.)

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Difference between the NSA and Google

In his June 28, 2014, letter to the *Notices* [November 2014 issue], Roger Schlafly claims that he does not see a distinction between the dangers posed by the massive collection of data by commercial companies like Google and the collection of data by the NSA. Perhaps that is because he is also unable to see a distinction between public and covert oversight. No doubt the practices of Google are a real danger, but commercial companies are subject to regulations and can be brought before open courts whose judges are appointed by an elected president and have to be approved by the Senate. The regulations governing the NSA are classified, and the NSA is answerable only to a closed court whose judges are ap-

pointed, without further review, by a man who himself was appointed by a president who believed that one can defeat terror by declaring a war on it. Maybe these distinctions seem trivial to Dr. Schlafly, but even he should be able to understand why somebody like Alexander Beilinson, who grew up in a country where all courts were secret, does not.

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